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## Isaiah Thorriton Montgomery His Life and Work

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Isaiah Thorriton Montgomery  
His Life and Work

A Thesis Presented for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By  
Sister Mary of Victory, S. F.

Xavier University  
1933

Approved by Fr. Connela Mose

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## INTRODUCTION

"What man has done, man can do again"

A few years before the great contest which was to so seriously question the theory that there was a class morally bound to labor for the advantage of a privileged class above it, a little black slave boy on a Mississippi delta plantation had taken as his motto the above adage which forced him onward in after years to a unique place in the history of his people.

I propose to present his story and life work with this object: to cite him as an example of what can be accomplished by one who possesses a vision and the will to labor that the vision may become bedome an actuality.

Though not until he had reached his fortieth year did he begin his life's great work, yet in his earnest striving to do well his part despite all handicaps, he learned that self control and kindly tolerance which enabled him to become a leader of his fellows.

It is true that great and heroic ascrifices have been made by our people stimulated by religious emotionalism. But Isaiah T. Montgomery was always a man of sound, logical thought. When he sought cooperators in his great enterprise, he frankly told of swampy lands, dense forests, wild animals, hardships, and sacrifices. But to offset these, he offered the surety of a peaceful life among their own kind, permanent security with all the greatly coveted rights and privileges of civilization for their posterity. Though many quailed before the grim prospects, a brave group of fellow laborers from the joint plantations, Hurricane and The Briarfield,

went forth to the contest.

At the time of this undertaking, a new generation had grown up, a generation to whom the crack of the slave driver's whip, though a dire possibility, had not been a grim reality. This young progeny had a background in which Straight, Fisk, and Hampton were possible aspirations. To many came letters from fellow-comrades, now living in western towns, telling of economic and educational betterment. That many, even among the older people, had lost faith in ever attaining their God given rights in the South had been forcibly brought home to all by the great migration to other sections. To expect these people to go into a jungle, to labor long hours far away from the comforts and pleasures of a life made the move vividly enjoyable by their very newness, and by the periodic invasions of sullen whites on some companion who was a little too elated by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments, required heroic fortitude.

Mr. Montgomery knew his people full well. But his faith in them was so great that he dared risk all his earnings as a surety, and even to sanction his cousin's risk in becoming his partner.

Curiosity naturally seeks to learn how, when, and where this man born of slave parents into a state of slavery had acquired the qualities necessary, and why he, a man forty years of age with a family of his own, should dare undertake such a tremendous task. Our search takes us to the plantations of Messrs. Joseph and Jefferson Davis, The Hurricane and Briarfield.



## ANCESTRY AND MANHOOD

"Oh Consistency, thou art a jewel!"

Because of the severity of their slave laws, two states, Mississippi and Alabama, were considered the most destitute of pity. Yet in Mississippi, in that most abhorrent swampy river section around Vicksburg, was one of the few plantations which permitted the slaves to enjoy a sort of self government and to advance according to their capabilities. Mr. Joseph Davis believed that all people were more submissive to control the less they were governed. He taught his slaves the legal form of holding trial by jury, and punishment was inflicted on a culprit in accordance with the jury verdict. The Briarfield, Mr. Jefferson Davis' plantation, was operated by a Negro slave, James Pemberton, until his death in 1850.<sup>1</sup> It is most surprising to learn that a copy of the proscribed "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was surreptitiously obtained by the slaves, and read to the rest by those who knew how to read. But it is really astounding to hear of slaves lending their copy of an outlawed publication to a solicitous mistress.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Joseph Davis purchased at a slave market in Natchez a nineteen years old Virginia Negro, Benjamin Thorriton Montgomery. When the owner learned that his chattel could read and write, he encouraged him, in order to increase the capabilities of the other slaves. This Benjamin Montgomery paid his owner the worth of ordinary field labor and conducted a fruit shipping business of his

<sup>1</sup>"Jefferson Davis" by His Wife. Vol. I, pp.174-175

<sup>2</sup>"The Negro in the New World" by Sir Harry Johnston. pp. 440-447.

own. Mrs. Davis said that he often purchased the entire crop of the two plantations and of other people in "The Bend", and that he was financially able to credit the Davis family to the extent of \$2000.<sup>1</sup> Later he became book-keeper, mechanic and general clerk of the estate. It was for the purpose of patenting this man's invention, a boat propeller, that Mr. Jefferson Davis recommended to the Confederate Congress the law passed by that body favorable to patenting inventions of slaves.<sup>2</sup>

In 1847, Isaiah T. Montgomery the younger of two sons, was born in the slave cabin of this educated slave. He was taught to read and write by his father, and at the age of nine, he became the personal servant of Mr. Jefferson Davis. One day in a gathering, Mr. Davis divulged the literary ability of his slave attendant. Greatly shocked by the knowledge, one of the gentle ladies suggested that his thumbs be chopped off as a punishment. But her chivalrous husband immediately dissented as the loss of the thumbs would be an impediment to picking cotton.<sup>3</sup> The Montgomery family remained on the plantations until the fall of Vicksburg in 1863, when the lad Isaiah went with Admiral Porter as cabin boy and the family migrated to Ohio. Perhaps it was during this time that "A Southern Romance"<sup>4</sup> is supposed to have taken place. In 1867, Mr. Benjamin Montgomery and his two sons agreed to take over the estate of the Davis brothers, 4,000 acres. They were to pay the former owners an annuity of \$18,000, while the plantations were

<sup>1</sup>"Jefferson Davis" by Mrs. J. Davis, Vol. I, pp 174-175

<sup>2</sup>"Journal of Negro History" Vol. II, p. 24

<sup>3</sup>"The Negro in the New World" pp. 440-447.

<sup>4</sup>"The Child World Part One "A Southern Romance" pp. 13-14



to afford a home and maintenance for the ex-slaves. In the first year, due to high water, only a third of the agreed amount was available, which was accepted as payment in full by Mr. Joseph Davis. During the thirteen years this plan was in effect, these people labored so successfully that they ranked third in cotton production in Warren county. The annual shipment to New Orleans was from 1500 to 2500 bales of cotton and "a thousand or so tons of seed".<sup>1</sup> River vessels came to the plantation landing to receive their cargo. From this estate went cotton exhibits to the St. Louis Autumnal Fairs, which always won a premium.

In 1870 Mr. Isaih Montgomery brought his bride, nee Miss Marth Robb, to live in the residence of his former master. It was in this house that his daughter, Mrs. Mary C. Booze, who today is the best known Negro woman in the State, was born.

After the death of Mr. Joseph Davis in 1880, because of a disagreement among the heirs and of the frequent overflows, the property was surrendered. Mr. Montgomery had purchased the adjoining plantation, "The Uraino", and he operated this for the next few years.

It was at this time that the personal economic contact between the Davis and the Montgomery families was broken. But the kindest relations have continued down through the third generation. Mrs. Davis in her "Menoirs" gives in full the letter of condolence sent at the death of their former master by the Montgomery family. Occupying a most prominent position on the mantel of the Booze living room is a squat vase from which bulge forth missives of various kinds. This vase, the last gift of the dying Mrs. Davis to

<sup>1</sup>"Our Great State, Mississippi" I. T. Montgomery pp. 13-14



the Montgomery family, holds in its depths the petals of the petals on which she last gazed. The missives are the various greetings sent by the Davis posterity to the Montgomery family. It is to the zealous care of the English lung specialist, a son-in-law of Mrs. Davis, that Mr. Booze, the son-in-law of Mr. Montgomery, attributes his almost miraculous restoration to health, while exiled to Colorado.

and to the Louisville, New Orleans, and Texas Railway. Since the prevalent belief then was that Negroes were peculiarly fitted to live in swampy semi-tropical areas, and as a scheme to arrest the steady migrating flow from the South, the railroad officials determined to sponsor a Negro colonization movement. Appreciating the wonderful success Mr. Isiah Montgomery (Mr. Benjamin Montgomery died shortly after Mr. Joseph Davis' death) had achieved as a group leader, Major George McDaniel, the land commissioner of the railroad, urged Mr. Montgomery to make a settlement on the grant. Accompanied by a civil engineer, Mr. Mc Carthy, Mr. Montgomery toured the grant in quest of a suitable location. Finally midway between Vicksburg and Memphis they came upon an old Indian mound near the junction of several principal bayous. Recognizing the utility of these natural drainage channels, Mr. Montgomery determined upon this site, and named the colony Mound Bayou, 7/12/87. He took over 30,000 acres of land for colonization, he and his cousin, Mr. Benjamin Green, buying outright 1000 acres. Then the laborious task of clearing the land and building the first rude houses began. In keeping with the usual fraternal spirit of Mr. Montgomery, the first house completed was that of Mr. Green, and the two cousins lived together.

## THE GREAT ENTERPRISE

"He plants his tree to serve a race to come"

For the purpose of encouraging the agricultural and commercial development of the territory extending along the unruly Mississippi river, the state of Mississippi had made a grant of a million acres of this rich land to the Louisville, New Orleans, and Texas Railway. Since the prevalent belief then was that Negroes were peculiarly fitted to live in swampy semi-tropical areas, and as a scheme to arrest the steady migrating flow from the South, the railroad officials determined to sponsor a Negro colonization movement. Appreciating the wonderful success Mr. Isaiah Montgomery (Mr. Benjamin Montgomery died shortly after Mr. Joseph Davis' death) had achieved as a group leader, Major George McGinnis, the land commissiour of the railroad, urged Mr. Montgomery to make a settlement on the grant. Accompanied by a civil engineer, Mr. Mc Carthy, Mr. Montgomery toured the grant in quest of a suitable location. Finally midway between Vicksburg and Memphis they came upon an old Indian mound near the junction of several principal bayous. Recognizing the utility of these natural drainage channels, Mr. Montgomery determined upon this site, and named the colony Mound Bayou, 7/12/87. He took over 30,000 acres of land for colonization, he and his cousin, Mr. Benjamin Green, buying outright 1000 acres. Then the laborious task of clearing the land and building the first rude homes began. In keeping with the usual fraternal spirit of Mr. Montgomery, the first home completed was that of Mr. Green, and the two cousins lived together



until Mr. Montgomery's home was built. It was to this first home that the first child born in the new colony came, a child destined to be its future mayor.

With none of our modern flood control devices to deter it, the Mississippi had its overflows almost each year. These floods, the boll weevil, and crop failures made the payments under the ten year contract most difficult. But the town grew slowly and surely.

In 1890, when Mississippi determined to draw up her new constitution, Mr. Montgomery was the sole Negro representative in that convention where at its end he delivered his paneggric favoring the new constitution. Naturally one would expect him to labor for the welfare of his new project while at the State capitol, and it was during this time that Mound Bayou was incorporated under the laws of the State of Mississippi, during the administration of Governor Anselm Mc Laurin. Later under Governor Earl Brewer it was chartered as a second class town empowered to devise and consider plans for all necessary improvement.

The town had a natural growth, each convenience being added as need developed. The first post office needs were taken care of in the hall of Mr. Montgomery's home. Stores sprang up to supply the colony's necessities. As the number of children increased, a private school was opened, and later a plea was made to the American Missionary Association to establish a school. Knowing the "church school" plan followed by the Association, one is surprised at not finding a Congregational church in the town. Mr. Fred Miller, one of the representative business men, says the Association did not intend to establish a permanent school but only to aid the colony until it could establish its own institution. The primary

and secondary school established lasted for about twenty years and from its training students entered the various Southern Colleges and even to the leading universities of the North. There are many members of the middle aged group who finished either Alcorn, Fisk, or Straight, and some few who can claim Howard, the University of Michigan, and Harvard Law School as their Alma Mater.

Through the munificence of the early settlers, an extensive land grant was made to the A. M. E. Church for the support of a sectarian school. On this grant the agricultural branch of Campbell College is located. The Baptist Church is represented by Baptist College which boasts of an enrollment of 250 students.

Animated by that spirit of utter dependence on God which had made bearable the horrors of slavery, these people erected a multiplicity of church buildings. Ten buildings house the four different denominations found there. Most of these are very representative, and one or two of these edifices are elaborate. It is really sad that there is such a vast intellectual discrepancy between the pulpit and the pew. One is surprised that in this day and time religious tyranny is strong enough to interdict almost all forms of amusements, and even close the only two picture shows the colony ever had. For this reason church going is not a popular pastime of the Mound Bayou Youth, who has to seek his amusement elsewhere.

In order to facilitate the production of cotton a gin was an urgent necessity. Mr. Montgomery made a trip to New York in order to solicit the aid of Eastern capitalists. While refusing to even present the matter to his board of directors, one banker offered to petition a \$5000 gift, one eighth of the desired amount, for either

675-09



a church or a school. This Mr. Montgomery refused, replying "I am not seeking charity." As a last resource, the state "Bank of Mound Bayou" was established with Charles Banks as president, in order to finance the project. A Negro engineer, Mr. Cook, was awarded the contract of erecting the gin and oil mill from the result of a competitive examination. Mr. Cook, now an elderly gentleman doing a thriving plumbing business in the colony, delights to recall the incidents related to that examination. A young graduate from a Northern school of engineering was among the competitors, but he failed to give an accurate estimate of the number of revolutions per minute required for the main shaft. The mill and gin are both in operation and have given satisfactory service. Although the bank went out of business the year after Mr. Montgomery's death, 1935, it paid its depositors dollar for dollar. So strong is the hope of the officials to resume business when the economic situation becomes more stabilized, that all the banking equipment has been left in the building.

By the grouping of the commercial and industrial buildings around the railroad station, this section of 250 acres became designated as the town which depends upon the outlying agricultural district of 39,750 acres for support. The town has a population of 1200, made up of the plantation owners, the business men, and a few of the poorer class. The rural district has a population of 3000, composed of owners of small farms, tenant farmers, and hired help. Over the whole colony is a mayor with his board of aldermen. These officials are elected biennially by the qualified voters. The fulfillment of the usual requirements of registration of payment of pole tax constitutes a voter. Mr. Montgomery was the first mayor

and served for over four years. He resigned to accept the office of receiver of public monies at Jackson, Mississippi. As there are no particular political parties represented in the local government, the election only is held. A plurality of votes determines the successful candidate. The present mayor is completing his fifth term of office.

Despite the assertions of some of our own self appointed critics that fear of a white man is an essential for order in Negroes, this town, where white people cannot hold property, has not needed a jail for over ten years. All undesirables are given the choice of paying a heavy fine or of leaving town. For such minor offenses as do occur, the Negro sheriff informs the delinquent to report for trial the next morning at the mayor's office. The present mayor is also the justice of peace. In regard to the good order of this place, the white county sheriff claims that there is less disorder and fewer arrests in Mound Bayou, though fifth in size in his district, than any other town or voting precinct of Bolivar county.

By converting the four bayous into modern drainage canals, Mr. Montgomery made available for cultivation many acres of swamp land. These canals also take care of sewerage disposal. The city water supply is furnished by Artesian wells. The fire department makes use of chemicals as the water pressure is not sufficient for fire-fighting. All the civic business is conducted by Negroes. It is truly gratifying to find Negroes efficiently performing the duties of ticket agent, post master and manager of the telephone station.



"He attained and achieved for an idea."

We proposed to learn from the study of this great man--for great he was--the how, when, and why of his achievements. Even under far greater handicaps, ardent thirst for freedom and advancement had brought about daring attempts of slaves for self-betterment. But here in an environment of self government, where, even proscribed books were obtained, where thought and vision had brought forth slave inventions, may one not surmise that the yoke of bondage was excruciatingly galling? They realized that their lot was exceedingly mild to that of many others, but the dread uncertainty of even this scanty consolation was oppressive.

In every character who has accomplished an heroic feat three qualities, strength, poise, and sympathy, are preeminently obvious. Even under pain of becoming tedious let us consider some examples of the first quality in the life of Mr. Montgomery. It took a strong will and a sense of duty to make a young man toil thirteen years, during many of which there was not a cent for the toiler, for the benefit of the ex-owners and their heirs. Then at the close of those laborious years, when deprived of all hope of gain, it was only strength of will that withstood despair and hate. The whole settlement episode is one great example of heroic fortitude. We know the many obstacles he overcame in the actual work, but what of the many that he faced when seeking cooperators in his efforts? How many times he must have received curt refusals from those best fitted in talent and training to give him valuable assistance?

Let us accept the definition of poise as a beautiful way of

doing the right thing at the right time. From all who came in contact with Mr. Montgomery, we hear universal praise of his charming simplicity and gracious ease. It was this special quality which impelled Mr. B. T. Washington to propose that he be chosen speaker on behalf of the Negroes when President Roosevelt unveiled the Lincoln Monument at Hodgenville, Kentucky in 1909. But especially must we recognize the great strength of this quality when we consider his ability to draw trained Youth despite the lure and glamour of Northern cities, and to inspire such trust and confidence that he could obtain the funds necessary for his cooperative plans. For Mound Bayou was supported and sustained by the capital of her own people.

A little incident related by Mrs. Booze, I think, best portrays the deep rooted sympathy of her father and his earnest effort to embed this quality in the hearts of others. She said that her father seldom refused any request she made, even if in the granting the service of a laborer from the field was required. But in return he exacted for her the daily performance of at least one kind deed for some one less fortunate than she. Then he himself said that it was for the purpose of bettering the condition of his poor oppressed people that he labored so earnestly and so well.

Thus we find a great desire to enjoy the rights and privileges of life, a strong character and business experience, and the opportunity to do, explain the foundation and continuance of Mound Bayou.



## NOW

It is hardly fair to base any judgments on the results of the past nine years. Even the wealthiest cities have barely kept pace with time. Since the National banking holiday, the suspension of Mound Bayou's bank from operation seems very mild. The gravest danger of all that threaten the colony, as I see, lies in the effects of that beautiful school building, erected and equipped by the colony at the cost of \$115,000. Since the county superintendent has the power to select the teaching staff, at present a principal and twelve teachers, conditions are very bad. Poorly prepared teachers must needs mean poorly trained future citizens, and internal destruction will surely follow. Is it not alarming to find that a population of 12,000 people has a voting strength of 121? A political club for the young people has been established by Mr. Miller, a National Republican Representative. In National politics, the colony takes great interest. Of the eleven Republican delegates from Mississippi, three were from Mound Bayou. It was through the efforts of Mrs. Booze, the Republican National Committeewoman, that President Hoover was forced to withdraw the name of B. B. Montgomery as U. S. marshall of the Mississippi district after having twice presented it to the Senate for ratification.

The people of the ~~farm~~ing district have keenly felt the hard times. A Red Cross Relief Center, housed in the bank building, ably takes care of the distribution of supplies. Since the colony is located in two townships, two offices and two sets of records are required. In each of these offices, four young ladies under supervision of Mrs. Booze, take care of all requirements of inves-

tigation, reports, and record keeping.

Due to many reasons there has been a great loss in population by the migration of the better educated young people. Among the remaining few there are so few children. These people do take an active part in civic life, especially the women, but when they pass away who will be prepared to take their places?

It is for this reason that the leading men of the colony have formed the Mound Bayou Foundation, an organization whose purpose is to perpetuate the memory of the first settlers. They hope that by 1938, the fiftieth anniversary of the birth of the colony, to have established business enterprises that will give employment to its Youth and keep the money in the colony. For this reason they are seeking outside financial aid.

It is really almost unbelievable that our people should send their laundry out of their own settlement to a white laundry. The bread sold in their stores is brought in from other towns. At present there is no ice plant in the colony, although the former plant did a good business.

If as general economic conditions improve, the town could improve its roads, thus aiding transportation, and take over the administration of its school, these people should continue to keep pace with the other Delta towns.